

Trials and Tribulations, Results and Implications

Digitizing for EuropeanaPhotography

Fred Truyen and Sofie Taes

Abstract

EuropeanaPhotography (<http://www.europeana-photography.eu>) is an EU-funded (CIP-ICT-PSP) project aiming to contribute over 430.000 high-quality early photography images to Europeana (<http://www.europeana.eu>). To this end, a team consisting of 19 photo agencies, museums and archives - most of them members of the newly established International Consortium for Photographic Heritage - has digitized, metadated and enriched their masterpieces from the first 100 years of photography. A travelling exhibition, “All our Yesterdays” (<http://www.earlyphotography.eu>), turns the digital collection that has resulted from these efforts, into a real life experience intended to be presented at museums throughout Europe. In this paper, we discuss the issues of digitizing photographic heritage. Unfolding the process of material selection, the choices made with regard to metadata structure, technical standards, digitization and rights management, we touch upon more philosophical issues involving the position and functioning of photographic heritage in memorial practice, its impact on archival procedures, the photographic image in a digital context, the photo and intellectual property rights. We hope this paper will unveil the hidden complexity of an ‘abstract’ cultural object – such as the (digital) photo - and demonstrate the need for a reconceptualization of our relation to the medium as prompted by digitization practices.

Résumé

EuropeanaPhotography (<http://www.europeana-photography.eu>) est un projet patrimonial soutenu par l’Union Européenne (CIP-ICT-PSP) qui cherche à enrichir la banque de données Europeana (<http://www.europeana.eu>) de 430.000 images de haute qualité. Dans ce but, un groupe de 19 partenaires (agences photographiques, musées, archives), la plupart d’entre eux réunis dans le Consortium for Photographic Heritage récemment créé, a numérisé, décrit à l’aide de descripteurs et diversement enrichi les chefs-d’œuvre de leur propre collection pour la période du premier siècle de la photographie (1839-1939). L’exposition itinérante « All Our Yesterdays » (<http://www.earlyphotography.eu>) transforme la collection numérique qui résulte de cet effort en une expérience directe et authentique que l’on pourra visiter dans des musées à travers toute l’Europe. Dans cet article, nous discutons les problèmes fondamentaux de la numérisation de l’héritage photographique. Par le biais d’une analyse des processus de sélection, des choix à faire quant aux descripteurs, des normes techniques à respecter et de la gestion des questions de numérisation et des droits intellectuels, nous abordons également des questions d’ordre plus philosophique, qui concernent les rapports entre héritage photographique et mémoire culturelle, l’impact de ce travail sur les techniques d’archivistique, la place de l’image photographique dans un

contexte numérique ou encore les débats sur le copyright des images photographiques. Notre ambition est de mettre au jour la complexité dissimulée d'un objet culturel « abstrait » (la photo numérisée) et de montrer la nécessité d'une nouvelle conceptualisation de nos rapports avec le médium à la lumière des pratiques de numérisation.

Keywords

photography, cultural heritage, digital humanities, art philosophy, photo archives

The Project

With the advent of social media and related frenzies, such as the selfie, the world of photography has been shaken profoundly. In many cases we undergo such changes in our personal lives without much leverage to counterweight, but in the professional field of photography decisions have to be made that do have an influence on evolving practices. Photographic archives in particular are struggling to adapt to this changing environment. It is in the context of our department's activities - such as the CIP funded project EuropeanaPhotography (<http://www.europeana-photography.eu>), its travelling exhibition "All our Yesterdays" (<http://www.earlyphotography.eu>) and spin-off International Consortium for Photographic Heritage¹ - that several decisive issues were touched upon, relating to how photographic archives could/should be run in today's internet-driven world.

EuropeanaPhotography is well underway the final year of its project term. Kicked off in February 2012, this EU-funded digitization project (CIP-ICT-PSP) is dedicated to the remnants of the first century of photography (1839-1939): an exquisite part of Europe's cultural heritage that has been the driving force and focal point of every decision and action of this project's tight-knit, but slightly unusual hybrid consortium. Consisting of public institutions or institutions with a public mission, such as museums, archives and universities (KU Leuven, ICCU/SGI, Polfoto, CRDI Ajuntament de Girona, GenCat Cultura, Nalis, MHF, Arbejdmuseet, Divadelny Ustav, ICIMSS, Lithuanian Museums) and of private, commercial partners (photo agencies such as TopFoto, Imagno, Parisienne de Photographie, United Archives, Alinari), this collective has compiled an impressive collection of digitized, metadated and enriched images that will – fully deployed – count no less than 430.000 items as a contribution to Europeana (<http://www.europeana.eu>).

1. The International Consortium for Photographic Heritage unites Europe's leading photo archive collections, with the aim to stimulate digitization, develop metadata, foster preservation practices, share knowledge, provide training and advocacy on photographic rights.



*1. United Archives UNA_00656632
Erich Andres | Valle di Pompei (Italy), 1965
Photographers in action.
© United Archives*

Another successful outcome of EuropeanaPhotography is the multimedia and photographic exhibition “All Our Yesterdays (1839 – 1939). Life Though the lens of Europe’s First Photographers”. In this exhibition, high-quality reprints from collection treasures – not the original prints or negatives – show how even the earliest photographers have used their camera as a time machine, framing the present, documenting the past and showing a glimpse of the future. Capturing their world from its most beautiful angles as well as in its most dramatic days, they left us with the impression of a pre-war Europe that actually does not seem completely unlike the world we know today: people’s everyday life, joys and sorrows, stories and dreams turn out to have been strikingly similar to ours. To re-build these stories through a kaleidoscope of early photographic masterpieces, “All Our Yesterdays” presents the most exquisite, often unseen, images of a world in change, showcasing the mastery and art of the very first photographers. First presented from 11 April to 2 June 2014, in Palazzo Lanfranchi - Museo dello Grafici, Pisa, the exhibition is designed as a modular and flexible concept, allowing for it to travel around museums worldwide with limited practical implications. Moreover, the ‘physical’ setup goes with a multimedia- and online-extension, offering a virtual (and omnipresent) counterpart to the on-site experience.

After almost three years ‘in the field’, working our way through the ‘description of work’, enjoying the pleasures but encountering the perks of digitization as well, we feel we’ve now reached a point where we can look back on the results of our endeavors, not only from a quantitative/qualitative

point of view, but a conceptual/philosophical perspective as well. In this respect, EuropeanaPhotography fits the academic scope of the ‘Digital Humanities’ perfectly. This is the domain in which the present paper is to be situated. It addresses the decisions made within the project’s context, the results and implications of the standards we set, and of “digitization” as a broader concept: is digitization merely a hatch through which cultural heritage is passed, or does it function like a stargate or a teleportation device, taking apart the original molecule by molecule, to later reinstate it as... yes – as what exactly?

Implication 1 – ‘standards’ for content: building a collection

With hundreds of thousands of valuable, beautiful, interesting, unique, ‘unseen’ images available, and ‘only’ 430.000 to be delivered to Europeana, the content selection - allowing for the diversity of our partner’s holdings to be showcased, as well as to deploy some homogeneity to establish the project as a project – was bound to be a necessary, but intensive and strategic process. Therefore, a complete work package, headed by KU Leuven, was dedicated to this task. With the general outset of selecting images tracing the evolution of European society and the art of photography from 1839 to 1939 (start of the WWII), the historical, artistic or social relevance of the work = impact

- territorial criteria (pictures originating from the European continent, as well as landmark pictures from the colonies),
- complementarity with existing material in Europeana,
- synergy of content among providers,
- and of course ... the eye of the beholder: we looked for the best photo, under the motto “Photography first”.



2. MHF 767/II/143

*Paweł Mussil | Krakow (Poland), 1932 Silver gelatin print
Zofia Mussil with the magazine Światowid, playing with jojo's.
Collection: Photo albums of Kosiński Family*

© MHF

The latter consideration was closely related to the notion of ‘masterpiece quality’, that functioned as a general directive throughout the process, with the masterpiece defined as:

a work done with extraordinary skill, especially a work of fine art, craft or intellect that is an exceptionally great achievement. To some, this means the best piece of work by a particular artist or craftsman.²

For “All our Yesterdays” we used a much finer sieve: focusing on “daily life in European cities”, we put the combined expertise of the consortium to use in a voting process, to locate those images that fitted our conceptual, technical and aesthetic ideals best, without automatically recurring to the “big” narratives related to that era. This “pool” of images was then processed and refined by the curator, and from her final selection the exhibition structure with its specific subthemes and accents, emerged.



3. SGI / ICCU 15_10_7

Elena of Savoy, Queen of Italy | Bodø (Norway), 1898

Aristotype

A street in Norwegian Bodø.

Collection: Historical Fund. Journey of Vittorio Emanuele III aboard the yacht Jela 1898

© SGI / ICCU

Both the content selection for EuropeanaPhotography and the compilation of “All Our Yesterdays” seem to stretch out to be an extremely time-consuming and painstaking process. But it has actually been a true pleasure for our content providers: this methodology brought about a deeper understanding of the richness and value of their collections, as they were encouraged to re-explore/fully explore their holdings, thereby uncovering ‘hidden’ objects and undisclosed sub-collections. Clearly, in this respect,

2. Source: Artlex <http://www.artlex.com>

the standards we set functioned as a motor of discovery and knowledge, furthering the destiny of photographic heritage

But the perks are there as well, naturally: you choose – you lose. By selecting what was to be digitized and published as ‘the EuropeanaPhotography collection’, we have automatically ‘restricted’ the perception of this slice of art and social history, to any user accessing it through the digital gateway Europeana. We have been ‘editing’ and ‘curating’ the early photography section in Europeana to the best of our knowledge and with the best intentions – but it is still just our mirror through which it can be viewed. Life in Europe as people knew it about a century ago, is shown in” All Our Yesterdays” – but again, to a very limited extent and as the result of an inevitably subjective process. A huge responsibility for our consortium, that perhaps should come with an appropriate disclaimer...

Implication 2 - the digital memory object vs. the archival mission

Next: when we unveil this collection of digitized early photographs, which ethical wheels are we putting in motion at the side of the user community, and that of the content provide ...?

We are currently experiencing what Jay Winter calls a “memory boom” in history studies (Winter 2001, 2006): a phenomenon tightly linked to the renewed interest in cultural heritage, and accentuated by the 14-18 Great War commemorations. As indicated by critics and scholars, this fosters a manifold manifestation of nostalgic, nationalistic and – more broadly – euphemistic visions of history, in which the narrative often gets adapted to current values. Therefore, its messages are echoes from today’s preoccupations rather than testimonials from the past.



4. KU Leuven 0007_0002_000466_1

Anonymous | Westhoek (Belgium), after 1914

Gelatin dry plate

A soldier is keeping watch by the new railway track between Ramskapelle and Sint-Joris, after the polder has been flooded.

Collection Verwilghen

© KU Leuven

Elaborating on Maurice Halbwach's notion of "collective memory" (Halbwach 1992), which she deems somewhat broad and vague, Aleida Assman presented a more detailed study (Assman 2008) on how "memory" comes into play in the framework of history and cultural heritage. Individual memories gain their meaning in family memory, transcend into group memory and genuine social memory in a bottom-up movement. Immediate interpersonal contact and 'spatial closeness' at the level of the individual or the family, are lost at the level of social memory. Collective memory allows to share memories with people one has no direct contact with, as it is mediated through symbols and commemorative practices (Pettai 2011: 3). Political memory is genuinely collective by nature, since it aims to develop a collective identity through material representations such as texts, monuments and images; these can become part of a national memory and ultimately form a cultural memory.

The cultural memory of a society is based on institutions such as libraries, museums, archives, monuments, institutions of education and the arts as well as ceremonies and commemorative dates and practices (Assman 2008: 56).

While the individual photograph is not by any means an institution or monument, photos – and certainly what Elizabeth Edwards calls "the photographic ecosystem" (Edwards 2014) – play a very important role in the collective image we build of events, thus shaping our individual recollections into memories that fit a larger narrative. A high selectivity is in play here, first, with regard to what is pictured (think about conflict or war photography), and which photos are circulated, included in collections, promoted via exhibitions. This is especially contentious in those parts of Europe, where smoldering reminders of past conflicts make for photographic heritage never to be experienced as neutral (see more e.g. in Pettai 2011). Therefore, a pressing need for best practices within the context of photo archiving does exist: guidance and protection are indispensable to the archivist facing political pressure, merely by carrying out his professional mission.

Current cultural practices too are putting a lot of pressure on historic remembrance practices. More specifically, the world of photography is experiencing the strain from the social media explosion, that turned thousands of people into photographers - simply using their smartphone, or more sophisticated gadgets such as mini-drones, Go-Pro helmet- or dashcams. The "selfie" is everywhere! But the endless possibilities of the remix-culture obliterate the provenance of today's images: is that picture of Mona Lisa on Wikimedia true to the original or has it been tampered with? In the digital image, there is no "original" to be traced, since the "raw camera" image is not a participant in the social media sphere. Yes: digital curation does exist, but its "memory"-aspect is V in the current internet environment – ephemeral.

This world contrasts with the safe environment of libraries and archives, whose core business it is to preserve and warrant the causal link between an object and the past it represents. Nowadays, archives are incessantly urged to be useful by opening up their holdings to the public, through projects such as Europeana. One should, however, realize that when archives actually do open up, dramatic changes in their mission occur with a big impact on their activities.



5. *Parisienne de Photographie 7351-13*
Boris Lipnitzki | Paris (France), 1931
Young, Senegalese men at the colonial exhibition in Vincennes (Val-de-Marne).
Lipnitzki portraits | Roger-Viollet collections
 © Boris Lipnitzki / Roger-Viollet

Just a few examples: archival documents sometimes contain hate discourse or use terminology that is now socially unacceptable. Suppose that, digitizing for EuropeanaPhotography, we would stumble upon such metadata, or questionable photos in an otherwise unsuspecting collection - a series of beautiful pictures from the colonial era, carrying racist descriptions. Would we (have to) polish the original metadata? Are we to omit these pictures from public display? In many cases, we would have no other ‘legal’ option. Making material available online means: to become a publisher. In this view, archives and projects such as ours, should simply comply with the law. But for the researcher who uses a digital database of cultural heritage objects as a surrogate for accessing the original – e.g. because the archive doesn’t want precious originals to pass through too many hands - this is a major issue: he is no longer certain of the completeness of the collection or the correctness of the descriptions. The archive, then, is at odds with its core values.

In this respect too, EuropeanaPhotography had to decide on a shared project policy. The ethical standard we eventually chose to adopt, was to clearly mark those cases in which original metadata were changed; the selection of collections, furthermore, on a thematic-topical level, was directed towards those well within norms, so as to avoid having to cut up or edit part of the material.

Implication 3 – suivez le guide: metadata standards

With content selected and ethical outlines established, the most important decision regarding our contribution to Europeana comes into play: how to describe our digital items...?

As in any project uniting multiple partners - and in this hybrid constellation in particular – establishing standards for metadata and enrichment of those metadata were key for the project's success. While the EDM³ served as our blueprint, we ended up using a set of metadata rather more extensive than these basics required by Europeana. No matter how different the initial methods of description used by our content providers may have been, one thing was agreed upon by everyone: we would commit ourselves to providing all data necessary to let the images tell their story to the user.

However 'emotionally charged' this argument may sound, its governing criteria were in fact of a purely pragmatic nature:

- optimal searchability/findability,
- establishing relations/references within our collection, and within Europeana's content as a whole through topical identity > 'researchability'.



6. Archive of the Municipality of Limassol / Cyprus University of Technology Boa (11)

Anonymous | Limassol (Cyprus), 1890

Launched in 1853, the iron troop ship Himalaya conducted missions in – among others – Gibraltar, Queenstown and Portsmouth. It was at Cape Coast Castle during the Ashanti War, assumed torpedo service in 1886 and continued to serve as a troop ship until 1890. It was then converted to a coal hulk, in 1920 sold to a civilian contractor and sunk in June 1940 during an air attack on Portland Harbour.

The image shows the ship in 1890, visiting Limassol (Cyprus).

© Archive of the Municipality of Limassol

3. Europeana Data Model

To this end too, we decided to establish and implement a multilingual thesaurus, containing over 500 concepts related to photography. Currently covering 15 languages (Bulgarian, Catalan, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Slovak, Spanish, Hebrew and Chinese), this multifaceted tool is published as skossified linked data at <http://bib.arts.kuleuven.be/photoVocabulary>

It is only logical that these ‘ambitions’ were weighed against the extra work involved for many of the content providers. But the qualitative value of a ‘high metadata standard’ in the perspective of the project as a whole, prevailed over practical/financial implications and has indeed proven a worthwhile investment. Because now that the first batches of images are actually consultable through Europeana, it has become clear that this monumental database is – in the end – no different from any other database: you can only get out what you put in. A clear, non-cluttered rendering of consistent, meaningful and multilingual metadata is in fact not only the main, but the sole guide of the user to/through our collections.

Implication 4 – technical standards vs. esthetical decisions

As EuropeanaPhotography is a digitization project, its main goal/mission is not only content selection and description, but also establishing standards for digitization. Main objectives in this respect were:

- to align the content providers to the most recent technologies and procedures for preparation of early photos and digitization techniques
- to provide – as a consortium – images of a guaranteed and constant quality to Europeana.

To this end, technical specialists from the project consortium have identified the minimum technical, scientific and methodological requirements for good digitization practices, and published their findings as recommendations and tutorials in so-called fact-sheets (available for partners and external professionals). Next to dealing with equipment to be used (camera vs. scanner), adequate resolution (up to 100 Megapixel), lighting conditions etc., these fact-sheets deal with post-processing: removing dust, correcting the light balance and the dynamic range of the image, etc.

The latter set of topics procreated a discussion within and outside of the consortium regarding the extent to which aesthetic corrections to cultural heritage objects are acceptable. Again, the hybrid nature of our consortium is not to be obliterated here: between the practices at photo agencies (who provide images to magazines) and archives (primarily serving researchers) lies a world of difference. So in the end, no strict policy regarding post-processing was imposed. That being said: as photographic quality was a priority during the selection process, few badly damaged images were to be reckoned with, as they were lifted from the EuropeanaPhotography collection in an early stage.



7. *TopFoto EU022974*
John Topham | Swanscombe (United Kingdom), 1938
Gelatin dry plate
Lovers Lane, Swanscombe.
 © John Topham / TopFoto.co.uk

Another important basic decision, was to always digitize from the glass plate – not the ‘original’ print – when possible. This is an important issue, since for an historian or an archivist, many reasons would prompt the preference of a first print over a glass plate (=negative!). But from a technical, ICT-related point of view, the negative is the only logical choice: the mass of information that can be obtained from this material is many times bigger than that enclosed in contact prints. Moreover, the quality of negatives in the age of early photography was very high, with glass plates having average dimensions surpassing today’s full frame mid-format CCD’s. Print quality (e.g. albumen print or gelatin print), on the contrary, was clearly less outstanding; adding to this the higher susceptibility to aging of prints, digitizing the negatives seemed the best way to go. A decision we haven’t regretted since, as the digitization process – involving the backlighting of the negatives – has allowed us to restore the full dynamic range of the “original” photos through software intervention. However, transparency about the methodology used, is key here: a case in favor of the print – assuming, for instance, that a photographer, knowing the print process of that era, wanted to obtain a specific print result and acted thereupon – could still be made. The printing process also allows for several interventions in the image, which form an integral part of the creative work, the art of the photographer. Practical impediments have complicated our “clean” approach as well: sometimes, the closer examination of a print and a negative revealed that the supposed

relation between both was misjudged – in fact, several cases turned up of the same photo circulating in different “original prints”! While each of these objects holds a value of its own in the eyes of the (Art) Historian, archivist and museum curator, and should therefore all be represented “as they are”, the practice stemming from digitization introduces a radically different approach. Digitization focuses on the image and not its bearer. Digital representations of such images don’t exactly show “the objects as they are”, but a high-quality/high-tech rendition, with restored dynamic range and the potential to be cropped, enlarged or re-printed in several formats – if we would want to: much larger than was ever possible in the era of early photography.

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Sofie Taes is Master in Musicology (KU Leuven, 2004) and Medieval and Renaissance Studies (KU Leuven, 2005). She is the dramaturge and communication officer of Jos van Immerseel's period orchestra Anima Eterna Brugge, as well as a freelance writer on a wide range of musical topics. At CS Digital-KU Leuven, she is active as a researcher collaborating on EuropeanaPhotography and Europeana Space and as communication officer for Photoconsortium.

Sofie.taes@arts.kuleuven.be

Frederik Truyen is professor at the Faculty of Arts, Leuven University (KU Leuven). He publishes on E-Learning, ICT Education, Digitisation and Epistemology. In charge of CS Digital, the mediaLab of the Institute for Cultural Studies. He teaches Information Science at the BA and Online Publishing at the MA level. Fred Truyen is involved in many projects on Open Educational Resources, such as Net-CU, OCW EU and LACE, and on projects in digitization of Cultural Heritage, such as RICH, EuropeanaPhotography and Europeana Space.

Fred.truyen@arts.kuleuven.be